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Season after Pentecost
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Touching Jesus

Mark 5:25-34 *She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well" ...He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."*

Let us consider this woman so desperate to touch Jesus. For twelve years she had suffered what is euphemistically called "hemorrhages," or in other translations, a "flow of blood." In the biblical world, this woman was considered religiously and socially, if not morally, impure. Levitical law defined menstruation as unclean. Here we need to recognize evidence of a religious and social tradition infused with male domination and ignorance, which are, of course, the same thing.

The religious tradition in which we stand, with its richness and sanctity for us, is nonetheless, like all religious traditions, in need of humility and the capacity for self-criticism. Woven into all spiritual traditions are threads of culture and historical circumstance that must be recognized and critically examined. There is the heart of a spiritual tradition and there is the cultural expression of it at any given era. We need to be discerning.

As to this woman's condition in religion and society, let me offer a story that gives another view. Some years ago, my brother-in-law and my niece attended a Native American pow-wow in northern Indiana. They were invited to participate in a sweat lodge ceremony. Before entering the sweat lodge, my niece was drawn aside by one of the elders of the tribe. He asked her privately whether or not she were menstruating. Now, my niece comes from a family full of liberated women, and she quickly assumed that she was facing more male domination. The elder rushed to explain that women who are menstruating are considered so powerful, so full of the life force that they would be to the ceremony what a power surge is to a computer. Here a people judged through history as inferior and "primitive" revealed a far deeper knowledge of and insight into life, seeing menstruation as an integral and central part of the whole cycle of life and life giving. My niece, having grown up in the American protestant Christian tradition with all its blessings and repressions, felt vindicated!

But the woman in the story was not simply menstruating. She had been hemorrhaging for years. Her situation was desperate and chronic—physically, socially, and religiously. She was cut off from other people, her own family, her religion, and, she was taught to believe, from God.

I think we can see in this woman all conditions of long-suffering. The social, mental, economic, and spiritual impact of slavery and institutionalized racism on African American people. The psychological and spiritual imprinting of the souls of girls, and younger and older women, told that they must keep in their places, stay within role guidelines, and not appear to be "pushy" or "too masculine." I remember a conversation with a woman in a position of great responsibility, who must make numerous hard decisions everyday on behalf of the poor. With a tinge of pain in her voice, she spoke of how often affluent white "friends" had told her that she was difficult to deal with because she was so "strong." I asked if she thought they would say the same thing to a man, especially a white man. She only smiled. We both knew the answer. There are those with disabilities, who are so often patronized and treated as though they were less than human, who suffer in silence. There are those with chronic depression who are given

the message that they should simply “cheer up” and not let things get to them, who are not taken seriously and learn to simply keep quiet about their suffering. There are those who experienced abuse as children or young people, who carry within them deep wounds that hinder relationships and create an inner world of fear and alienation. Each of us, too, I think, has some long-standing struggle or need that has kept us from living fully and freely. This woman in the story represents many, speaks for many, and reaches out for life on behalf of many, many people.

Mark tells us that the woman had sought help in other places. From doctors, who were no help but thought nothing of taking her money. With this one sentence, Mark points to the failure of human institutions, even “helping” institutions, to remain focused human need. They end up by increasing suffering and exploitation.

So, this woman has heard enough about Jesus for her to think that here at last she might find help and healing. She pushes through the crowd that is jostling against Jesus and her, until she can reach out and touch only his cloak. She believed that even touching the clothes of a holy person could access the divine power. Whatever her motivations, whatever her beliefs, out of her desperation and long-suffering she touches Jesus. The effect is immediate. The hemorrhaging stops. Mark intensifies the experience by saying that she felt in her whole body the healing of her condition.

What has happened to this woman goes far beyond the healing of her physical condition. She is completely restored to life. The walls that kept her from others and from God, all the prejudices, ignorance, legalism, and fear are broken through by this power that flowed from Jesus into her life. This is the meaning of the biblical word “salvation.” It does not mean the “saving” of a “soul” so that one can “go to heaven.” Jesus never talked that way. How we have watered down and missed the great impact and meaning of that word “salvation”! It means wholeness, restoration, the knitting together of what was torn apart, the creating of community where there was isolation and alienation. It means all of that and more. Touching Jesus means salvation, wholeness in mind, body, spirit, community, life itself. It is the power that is at the heart of the universe, the fundamental spirit that reshapes human life when it has gone awry, that creates communities of love where there was only tension and alienation, that gives birth to structures that give life instead of robbing people of dignity and identity. That’s the power that flowed into this woman through Jesus—the power of God’s redeeming love

Jesus knows that power had flowed out of him. Everyone else was just crowding in around him, but someone had really “touched” him. The whole reason for his life had found resonance in someone reaching out for precisely what he had to give and wanted to give. He asks his disciples, “Who touched me?” They are stumped by his question: “Are you kidding? Look at all these people!” Jesus keeps looking around. The woman steps forward in fear, not knowing how this rabbi will respond. Will he be angry with her as a woman who dared to do what was forbidden—an “unclean” woman touching a rabbi? Will he further humiliate her by throwing scripture in her face? She collapses at Jesus’ feet. And all he says is, “Daughter”—he calls her “daughter,” addresses her as a person, a human being, a child of God—“your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” Her faith. What is faith in this story but the deep longing for God, for healing, for wholeness that causes us to reach out to God? Isn’t faith that great longing, that life-long reaching out to God, to touch what is eternal, what is most life giving? It is this faith, says Jesus, that has been the source of her healing, and is the source of our own. Now she can go and live the wholeness that comes from God, that defies and stands firm against all that would tell us we are not God’s children, all that would condemn, exclude, and alienate us. All the false voices within us, telling us we are not worthy or cherished. All the voices and structures of society, of religion itself that would put us down cast us out, or give up on us.

Mark was writing his gospel for the church of his day, a couple of generations after Jesus' death, and resurrection. Mark meant for the church to see itself in this story--our own need to touch Jesus daily and our call to be the community of Jesus, the community in which others would touch Jesus, would touch God.

We are called and empowered to be, just as Jesus was, transparent to God. As a community, as individual followers of Christ, we can have that same instrumental presence, as the prayer of Francis says...instruments of God's peace, God's power, God's love. For those committing themselves to Covenant Membership, I would venture to say that the most challenging of the disciplines is not really tithing, or daily prayer, or even mission. They all have their difficulties for us. The most challenging discipline, however, may be committing ourselves to be channels of God's forgiveness and love to every person. That includes and begins with those here in our own community, in our own relationships with each other and those closest to us. If we are not living the reality of God's love in Christ with one another, only pretending to do so, then our life together cannot be transparent to others that they might touch Christ, touch God.

How can we grow in this transparency, so that God's power and love flow through us?

We become transparent as we ourselves touch Christ in the present moment, each day. This is the work of our inward journey, the life of prayer, meditation, silence. Here we acknowledge daily our own need for God's grace, God's unconditional love, God's power that breaks us free from all the inward chains that bind us from the joy and freedom God intends us to have. This is practicing being fully present to God in each moment. If we are preoccupied, anxious, filled nagging thoughts about the past or the future, we cannot experience the power of God's love that accepts us right now, right here, that flows toward us through every pore of the creation.

We become transparent as we transcend the old self and receive the new self Christ gives us. Our greatest enemy is not another person, institution, nation or religion, or anything else. Our greatest enemy is our self. The words of Jesus, the writings of Paul and others, bring us repeatedly back to this. When Jesus teaches that we are to die to ourselves, it is the overcoming of the false self in order to find the new self. It is the transcending of the isolated self, the self-preoccupied self, in order to find the self that is in relationship with the whole of creation and with other people.

I have been helped to understand this better through what is known in Buddhism as "emptiness." "Emptiness" does not mean a void, a vacuum. To know ourselves as "empty" means to understand the deepest truth about our lives, that we are "empty" of a separate, isolated self. We are "full," however, of relationship with all of life and with God. To become more transparent to God, to Christ, means working with our own lives so that we increasingly find this new self that is related to God, to others, and to the creation.

We become transparent to Christ, to God, as we live with ourselves and with others in authenticity and honesty. There is no greater inward pain, I think, than the energy it takes to pretend, to put up fronts, to hide from others and ourselves those parts of us that we have judged to be unacceptable or imperfect or that would not gain us the admiration and approval of others. When scripture speaks of acknowledging our sinfulness or confessing our sins, I don't really think what is meant is the pummeling of ourselves for being imperfect or not meeting up to some standard, human or divine. I think confession is the process of inward honesty. It is the facing of our true selves that are a mix of feelings and fears, obsessions and compulsions, guilts and insecurities. To live in authenticity and honesty means that we practice God's grace in our own lives and toward others. We don't fight against those parts of ourselves that keep popping up

and causing us or others pain. We don't turn our inner life into a battlefield, cutting ourselves in pieces with the sword of self-judgment or self-condemnation. We simply learn how to hold awareness of our whole inner life beneath the gracious light of God's love and power to heal. Neither do we cut up and dissect others with the sharp sword of measuring and judgment, of our expectations and desires to have others be what we think they should be. It is amazing how whole we ourselves and others can become when we practice touching the hem of God's garment, which is the garment of love and grace.

As we become more and more transparent to God's love and power, then God is able to work significantly through us. No matter how small our numbers. No matter how weak or wounded we feel ourselves to be. That is all part of what can make us transparent to God. What we think is so weak and broken and powerless in ourselves is the window through which God's healing power flows.